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ABSTRACT

This report offers highlights of a special summit in Colorado during which policymakers and citizens discussed the many causes and possible solutions to youth violence. It opens with the statement that solutions start with family, community, faith, and a culture that reinforces the lessons of right and wrong. It advocates connecting every child with a caring adult, creating gang-free communities, keeping guns away from kids, holding parents accountable for raising their children, helping kids who need it most, and providing a safe school for every child. Among the recommendations found in the report were to establish a statewide gang initiative in the Colorado Attorney General's Office; raise the age from 18 to 21 for purchasing firearms at gun shows; require safe storage of firearms in the home; provide more early identification and better referral to intervention services for high-risk children; speed up termination of parental rights in cases of severe abuse, neglect, or abandonment; promote responsible fatherhood; increase government/faith-based partnerships; increase government/business partnerships targeting kids who would benefit the most; change confidentiality laws to allow schools and law-enforcement agencies to share information; and enforce state laws regarding school codes of conduct and zero tolerance of inappropriate behavior. (RJM)

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SPECIAL REPORT

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# FROM THE SUMMIT ON SCHOOL SAFETY AND THE PREVENTION OF YOUTH VIOLENCE

GOVERNOR BILL OWENS AND ATTORNEY GENERAL KEN SALAZAR

AUGUST 1999

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EA 030 110

# Keeping Colorado's Kids Safe

BY GOVERNOR BILL OWENS AND ATTORNEY GENERAL KEN SALAZAR

*"On July Fourth, I was hiking with a group of friends up outside Estes Park. As we rounded a corner down by a stream, we were immediately filled with joy at seeing the trail flanked on both sides with our beautiful state flower. But as soon as someone said, 'Look at the Columbine' we stopped seeing the flowers and only felt a deep pit in our stomach."*

*— A lifelong Colorado citizen*

The events of April 20, 1999, have left a gaping hole in Coloradans' hearts. It is more than the horror at the destruction and death and innocence lost. It is the nagging question: Where have we gone wrong, and can we do anything to fix it?

In a search for answers, on June 19, 1999, we convened the Summit on School Safety and the Prevention of Youth Violence. The Summit brought together children, parents, teachers, school administrators, law enforcement officers, youth counselors, mentors, ministers and dozens of others who are devoted to finding ways to reduce youth violence. The Summit accomplished its goal of beginning a process of listening and learning.

The Summit was about youth violence in all its forms – in schools, on the streets, by gangs, or by loners. Youth violence impacts every community in our state. It is an urban, suburban and rural issue that knows no racial, ethnic or income boundaries. Importantly, youth violence is much broader than the relatively rare but sensational acts of school violence. Weapons in schools and gang violence have plagued our cities for far too long. And unlike the massacre at Columbine High School, most often youth violence happens one child at a time. Sadly, it has become all too common for children under the age of 18 to assault, rape and even murder – so common that at times it seems not to shock us.

At the Summit, we heard that more laws might not be the solution. Every time a youth commits a crime, he or she breaks laws already on the books. More laws won't stop these crimes. Therefore, it is not the intent of this report to present a detailed, item by item legislative agenda. Rather, the purpose of the Summit and this report is to engage policymakers and citizens in a discussion of the many causes and possible solutions to youth violence.

Because there is no single cause of youth violence, there can be no single solution. Rather, responsibility rests with all of us as individuals to make those changes which will make a difference.

We heard again and again – from the adults as well as the youths – some good old-fashioned common sense:

Courtesy of the Denver Rocky Mountain News, Esadras M. Suarez

***Students at the Summit raise their hands after being asked if they had seen guns in their schools.***

The solutions start with family, community and faith. The solutions require a culture that reinforces the lessons of right and wrong we work so hard to instill in our children. Curbing youth violence requires children to be connected with a caring adult to provide them critical guidance in how to be a responsible individual.

**"Moms and dads need to teach their children right from wrong. I don't think it is a school's responsibility to pick up the pieces of what's gone wrong at home."**

*High school youth participant at Summit*

The solution to youth violence lies primarily in our homes and in our communities. It will come when every parent recognizes that their highest duty in life is to be a good mom or dad. That means putting your children before yourself. It means fathers who make a commitment to be there daily for their children. It means knowing where your teenager goes, whom they talk to and what they learn when surfing the Internet.

As one youth at the Summit said: "It begins in our homes. We need to have parents teaching us the right morals and the right values. Our parents need to show us that they are examples."

One participant at the Summit, a minister, admonished fellow clergy and churches to "to stop preaching only from church pulpits but to go out in the streets as well." The comment underscores the need for the faith community to play a larger role in reaching out to troubled youth, at-risk families and in providing after-school opportunities for students.

To a large degree, a sense of right and wrong flows from faith. With a popular culture that bombards us constantly with the blurring of right and wrong, that says if it feels good, just do it, that glorifies pornography, violence and hate, it often requires a strong faith to find one's way.

The solutions to youth violence do



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## Keeping Colorado's Kids Safe (continued from page 3)

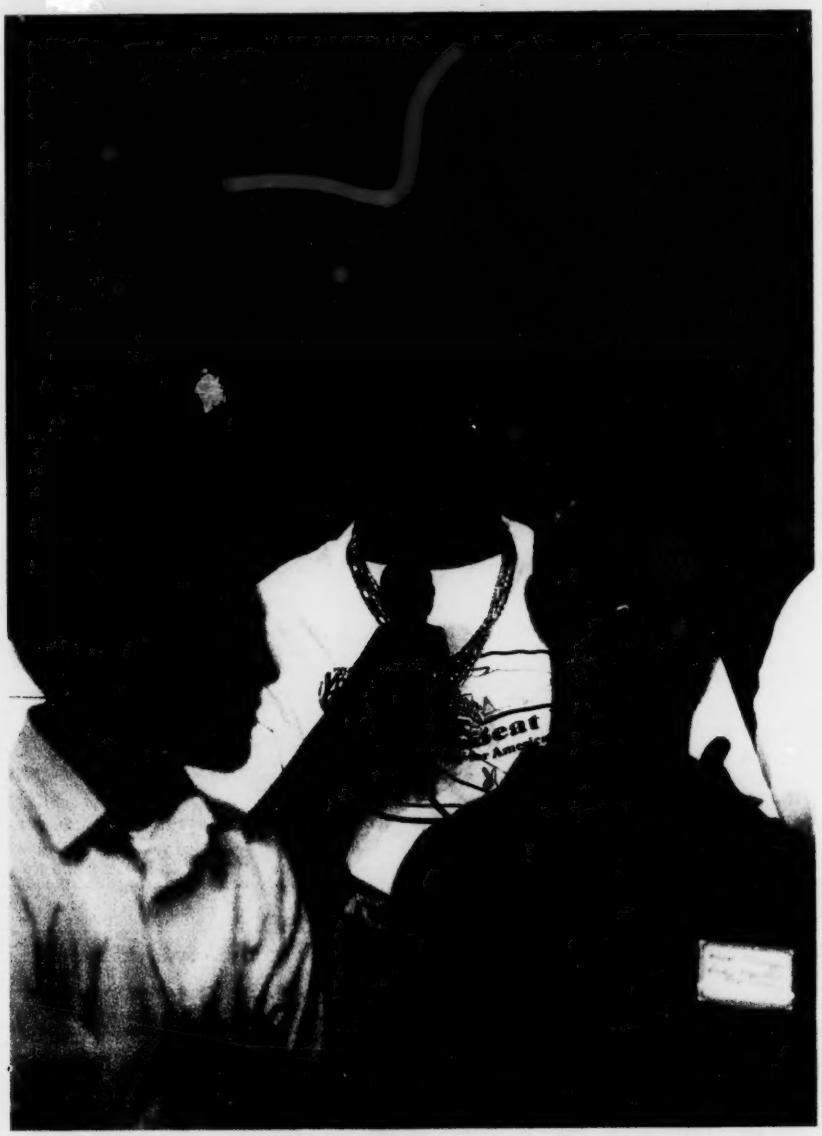
not lie solely in the State Capitol building in Denver. We cannot institute a blanket, one-size-fits-all policy regarding school safety: the issues facing a 1,700 student high school in Au[illegible]y be far different than those f[illegible] school in Eads with a total stu[illegible]y of 35. The government cant[illegible]ke people be good parents and the government cannot force children to have good moral values or have a strong faith.

Rather, the solutions to youth violence will come one person at a time; by turning off a violent and profane television show. The solutions will come one family at a time; by providing children with love and good role models. The solutions will come community by community; by reaching out to those less fortunate and providing a helping hand.

One thing government can do is to create a framework that strengthens the family rather than undermining it. A framework that builds up communities rather than tears them down. A framework that provides opportunities for people to help one another rather than placing barriers in the way of people helping people.

Thus we propose a number of steps that will aid our citizens, families and communities as they struggle to heal themselves and curb youth violence. We do not pretend to have all the answers to the problem of youth violence. No report is going to provide a magic cure for what ails too many of our children. The following are some steps that will head us in the right direction.

A high school student in the audience provided a very telling remark near the end of the Summit. He noted that while everyone is discussing the responsibility of others to address youth violence, youth themselves need to take responsibility for their own actions, as he does. This is a reminder that most of the kids in our communities are terrific. They are the product of first-rate parents, teachers and community support. ■



Courtesy of The Denver Post/Hyoung Chang

*A participant of the youth panel shares his ideas.*



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# Summary of Recommendations

**Gangs and Guns**

- Establish a statewide gang initiative in the Colorado Attorney General's Office
- Require background checks for firearm purchases at gun shows
- Raise from 18 to 21 the age for purchasing firearms at gun shows
- Ban "straw purchases" of firearms at gun shows
- Include juvenile records in background checks for firearms purchases
- Require safe storage of firearms in the home

**Parental Responsibility and Community Involvement**

- Establish Governor's Commission on Mentoring and Volunteerism to focus attention and resources on expanding community mentoring programs
- Provide more early identification and better referral to intervention services for high-risk children
- Speed up termination of parental rights in cases of severe abuse, neglect or abandonment
- Raise from $3,500 to $25,000 the parental liability for the illegal acts of their children
- Promote positive early childhood development and parenting skills
- Promote responsible fatherhood
- Strict enforcement of child support obligations
- Increase government / faith-based partnerships
- Increase government / business partnerships targeting kids who would benefit the most
- Promote affordable, positive after-school options for children – i.e., Scouts, mentoring, boys and girls clubs, faith-based organizations
- Diminish children's exposure to graphic violence by encouraging businesses, parents, schools and community institutions to cooperate in appropriately limiting access to such materials

**Safe and Orderly Schools**

- Change confidentiality laws to allow schools and law enforcement agencies to share information
- Enforce state laws regarding school codes of conduct and zero tolerance of inappropriate behavior
- Establish an independent, third-party hotline for students to report violations
- Every public school – but especially high schools – should promote more parental involvement in the classroom
- Expand alternative schools for high-risk kids
- Increase safety through review of physical facilities of schools and crisis plans in place
- Partner with outside agencies and faith-based organizations to provide more youth counseling services in schools
- Promote effective truancy programs
- Foster innovative programs for connecting with kids in larger schools – i.e., schools within schools

# Connecting Every Child with a Caring Adult

*"A kid can never have too many mentors, too many people investing in their lives."*

*— High school youth participant at Summit*

Every child needs a strong connection with a caring adult. For the majority of kids, this means their parents. However, because not every child is fortunate enough to be raised by a caring mother and father, other strategies must be used to connect with children – to ensure they are learning the right lessons that will prepare them for a life of responsible adulthood. But this takes time. As one Summit participant said: "Giving money shows that you have money. But giving your time to an individual child shows to that child that he or she is important."

Courtesy of The Denver Post/Hyoung Chang

*Dean Askew of Street Beat talks about the importance of mentoring in keeping kids out of gangs.*

Study after study has proven that in the absence of a strong family, mentoring programs, youth community centers, clergy and counselors are all integral parts to ensuring that every child has a positive role model to guide them through childhood and the treacherous waters of adolescence. Unfortunately, right now in Colorado, thousands of kids are waiting for mentors — waiting for a caring adult to enter their lives.

Thus our highest priority will be to connect these kids with caring adults. Through a newly created Governor's Commission on Mentoring and Volunteerism, we will focus attention and resources on helping to recruit, train and mobilize thousands of mentors. The Commission will be aided by an effort to target more prevention resources at mentoring initiatives. Providing consistent guidance by mentors can help to reduce teenage pregnancy, substance abuse and youth violence. As one high school participant at the Summit said: "We learn by example. We need role models."

Many nonprofits, faith-based institutions and other organizations already run mentoring programs in Colorado. They need to be supported and strengthened — doing so will be the mission of the Commission on Mentoring and Volunteerism.

Governments can spend money, but they cannot provide hope, love and the caring one-on-one relationships children need. It is often only in nonprofit agencies and faith-based organizations that we find volunteers willing to make long-term investments in serving their neighbors. Community organizations and faith-based organizations often succeed where government programs fail, because they take an holistic approach to intervention that looks at the whole person. Much more than providing services, community and faith-based organizations change lives.

Mentors, clergy and community volunteers should be welcomed into schools to assist overworked school counselors. Teenage mothers should be referred by welfare agencies to organizations that will welcome them and their child into caring arms. Schools should partner with civic groups such as Scout troops and faith-based organizations to provide after school activities in the school building that is already often a community center and which is sometimes underutilized after school hours.

When faith-based organizations are involved, it is vital to observe the separation of church and state by ensuring that participation is always voluntary and does not discriminate against anyone.

These are just a few of the steps that must be taken to ensure that every child in Colorado is connected to as many caring adults as possible. ■

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# Creating Gang Free Communities

*"I knew I had to get out of the gang or I was going to die."*

*— Youth participant at Summit*

We recently heard of a gang initiation where a 15-year-old boy was forced to stand and take two minutes of vicious beating from other gang members. When it was over, he was required to embrace his attackers. Asked why he submitted to this torture, the boy answered: "I knew this was going to hurt really bad, but I felt that if I could take it for just a couple of minutes, I'd be surrounded by people who loved me."

Children drawn to gangs are often in search of affection, affirmation, a sense of belonging, or out of a sense of hopelessness about their future. The most effective way to reduce gang violence is to prevent children from joining gangs in the first place. To do so requires greater support for gang prevention and intervention services.

A step in this direction will be the establishment in the Colorado Attorney General's Office of a new state gang initiative. This initiative will include assisting local authorities with combating gangs by gathering intelligence statewide about gangs and providing detailed information, "best practices" and other resources to help communities combat gangs. After all, gangs do not observe city and county lines on a map when staking out territory. ■

# Keeping Guns Away from Kids

*"I couldn't go to anybody at school and say "So and So has a gun," because they'd just tell me to leave that person alone."*

*— High school youth participant at Summit*

Since 1968, federal law has prohibited gun dealers from selling handguns to persons under the age of twenty-one and selling long-guns to those under eighteen. But this prohibition applies only to licensed firearms dealers, not to unlicensed sellers at gun shows.

Thus Colorado can and should do more to limit access to guns by youths. First, the federal age limits should be expanded to include firearms sold at gun shows, not just those sold by retailers.

Federal law currently mandates criminal background checks only for persons who seek to purchase firearms through retail outlets. Colorado state law should be amended to require criminal background checks on firearm purchasers at gun shows, thus closing a gaping loophole.

**Colorado state law should be amended to require criminal background checks on firearm purchasers at gun shows, thus closing a gaping loophole.**

One national study of the firearms-related behavior of criminally active youth currently serving time in maximum-security juvenile corrections facilities found that fully one third of those juvenile offenders said they had acquired firearms by persuading adults to make the purchase. These so-called 'straw purchases' of firearms – when someone is obviously buying guns for someone ineligible to buy them – should be outlawed at gun shows, just as federal law currently bans these sales at retail outlets. There should be severe penalties for the "straw purchasers" who circumvent the law by buying firearms for those who are banned from purchasing these firearms themselves.

Colorado already has laws against keeping harmful items such as pesticides, cleaners and poisons within accessible reach of children. Making it explicitly clear that firearms should be kept away from children's reach when not in use would strengthen these laws. Adults who fail to take such reasonable steps to prevent young people from gaining access to guns should be subject to criminal penalties.

Finally, juvenile records should be included in background checks of people attempting to purchase guns. Background checks are intended to prevent criminals from buying a gun, and if a 21-year-old tries to buy a gun, we should know if they used a gun in a crime as a 17-year-old. ■

# Hold Parents Accountable for the Raising of Children

*"The thing that molds us the most is our family, or lack thereof."*

*— High school youth participant at Summit*

Raising children is tough. No parent is perfect. But parenting means taking responsibility to provide a stable, permanent and loving home for children. Unfortunately, too many people today think nothing of bringing a child into the world and then absolving themselves from any responsibility for raising the child.

Values expressed and modeled at home, at school and in the community are essential throughout a child's life. A safe and nurturing early childhood enhances growth, curiosity, confidence and the capacity to communicate and learn. Children of all ages need their parents and teachers to hold them, nurture then, read to them, talk with them and model their language and environment. Often children pick up much more from the way adults act than from what adults say.

Parents who are never around harm a child's development in many ways. Unfortunately, in too many cases today, it is easy for fathers to shirk their responsibilities in raising children. Colorado should establish a legal framework that makes it difficult for fathers to ignore their paternal responsibilities.

Colorado should speed up termination of parental rights in cases where parents abuse, neglect or abandon their children. Drug addiction, sex crimes and imprisonment of the parent should be grounds for courts to terminate parental rights. Mothers and fathers should be held criminally responsible if they abuse a child in the womb and it is born with drug, alcohol or other parental induced problems. In such cases – and especially where one or both parents continue to abuse substances – parental rights should be swiftly terminated. The child should quickly be placed in a safe and secure adoptive home. Doing so will require Colorado to make sure the adoption process is child-centered. This will require streamlining court and administrative procedures to get children into permanent, loving homes as soon as possible.

Finally, parents need to understand that they can be held liable for the acts of their children. After all, letting teenagers roam the streets at night to "just do it" is a sign of parental neglect. Therefore, Colorado should raise the current limit of $3,500 for parental liability for the illegal acts of their children to $25,000. ■

# Helping the Kids Who Need it Most

*"You give me your money so I'll give your kids what you are not — time."*

*— Summit participant*

There is a saying that a youth who commits a violent crime on Saturday night is likely to be violent at school Monday morning. At the first indication that a child is at-risk of committing violent behavior, he or she should become part of a safety net to prevent their behavior from escalating out of control.

Strengthening this safety net requires opening the lines of communication between schools, law enforcement, mental health professionals and others. If a teacher sees disturbing behavior in a student, he or she should be able to find out from the police if the student has ever been in trouble with the law. Schools should be able to make a more informed decision as to whether a student's actions are normal adolescent behavior or rather part of a larger and more serious pattern of emerging violence. Yet – incredibly – Colorado's "confidentiality" rules often prevent schools, law enforcement and mental health systems from sharing this kind of information.

A strong safety net for high-risk youth requires one more important step – a strong referral system. Regardless of who identifies a youth in trouble – a teacher, police officer, counselor, or even a parent – there should be a resource in every community where they can turn to ask where to get help. This referral service should have a community-wide network of organizations and people ready to help troubled youth. Some kids will need a mentor or a youth center, others a church to shepherd them. Still others will need to enter counseling with their parents or receive intensive mental health treatment. Some may need to be taken from abusive parents and placed up for adoption. Others may enter into the justice system and need boot camps or be placed in the custody of the youth corrections systems in order to change their behavior as well as to protect society. ■

# Providing A Safe School for Every Child

*"I didn't trust the principal or the teachers. I didn't trust anybody."*

*— High school youth participant at Summit*

Every student in Colorado deserves a safe and orderly public school. Students also deserve an educational environment where they feel welcome and supported. Certainly every public school should be weapon and drug free. But schools also must be orderly, with every child at a school where the expectation is they will be ready to learn. Our schools must be places where students have clear expectations about their behavior toward other students and toward faculty. Students also must have a clear understanding of the consequences of bad behavior – and there should be such consequences.

**No instance of bad behavior should be overlooked — whether committed by star athlete or gang member.**

In Colorado, decisions regarding public school safety must generally be made school by school – depending on the needs of local communities. After all, urban school districts with dozens of schools and tens of thousands of students face very different issues than a rural school district with a few hundred students in one or two schools. A statewide and uniform public school safety law with one-size-fits-all mandates cannot account for these critical differences across the state.

However, there are general principles that should guide public schools in their safety decisions. First, every school must establish clear standards for behavior. In fact, this is already required by existing Colorado law, which requires that every public "school district prepare a written Code of Conduct and distribute it to students and parents.

Second, enforcing each school's conduct code must be absolute. Again and again at the Summit, students spoke of the need for trust among students, teachers and administrators. Today, too many students do not feel that everyone is treated fairly. Therefore, no instance of bad behavior should be overlooked – whether committed by the valedictorian, star athlete or gang member. Zero tolerance for violations is essential when dealing with the safety of school children. It is wrong and unfair to keep an unruly student in a classroom, where the other students pay the price for the disruptions. Therefore, suspension and expulsion policies should be strictly enforced.

Courtesy of The Denver Post/Hyoung Chang

*Attorney General Ken Salazar and Governor Bill Owens recite the Pledge of Allegiance at the Summit.*

However, expelled students need somewhere better to go than just the streets. Therefore, a much stronger network of alternative institutions for troublemakers should be utilized. Students who are expelled or at risk of being expelled should have more opportunities to attend alternative schools for at-risk students. Innovative strategies for funding more of these alternative

## *Providing a Safe School for Every Child* *(continued from page 9)*

schools will need to be explored.

Keeping kids in school is important – to the individual child, the school, and the community. There are a number of very successful truancy programs that are already in place in Colorado school districts. The key to these successful programs is the cooperative efforts, and common objectives, between the school district, the student's parents, the community and the court system. These existing truancy programs need to be assessed and utilized by communities across Colorado.

*Attorney General Ken Salazar introduces a youth panel at the Summit.*

A third principle for safe schools is that parents must be encouraged and welcomed into the classroom and the school. Visit just about any elementary school in Colorado, and you are bound to find parents working in the classroom, helping with class projects and being engaged with the children. Unfortunately, somewhere between the transition from elementary to middle school, parental involvement drops significantly. By high school, it is rare to find a parent in a public school classroom helping out. But, teenagers need parents just as much as do our younger children.

Therefore, every public school in the state should promote parental involvement in the school. Every public high school, junior high and elementary school should consider providing parents with a pamphlet that clearly spells out many opportunities for them to get involved – not just in after-school activities or evening committees – but in the lifeblood of the school: the classroom. Parents should be welcomed into public high school classrooms to serve as tutors, as teacher aids or hallway monitors and to lead lessons where they have a special expertise.

Finally, public schools should work to increase partnerships with outside agencies. Public schools should forge partnerships with law enforcement, volunteer counselors, faith-based initiatives, scout troops, mentoring programs, and other agencies to create safe, enriching programs for after school hours. This may mean school district buses letting children off in the afternoon outside a local community center running after-school programs. Or, it may mean a local pastor or other volunteers overseeing a youth program in the gymnasium of the public high school.

As we said earlier, each school must tailor its school safety plan to fit its own community's needs. There are, however, a number of successful, specific programs – some already in place in Colorado – that schools may want to consider.

An important one is student warning and reporting programs that enable students and faculty to immediately warn authority of a danger or crime. Many students at the Summit expressed the concern that even when they know

the rules are being violated, they are concerned for their own safety and feel they have no one to tell that a rule is being broken. Therefore, reporting programs should truly be third party and independent. Students said they would call a hotline only if they could be guaranteed anonymity. Since there is so much mistrust, hotlines at individual schools may have only limited potential – hence the need for one at an independent source. The toll-free hotline number should regularly be given to students and posted prominently around the school.

There should be increased sharing of juvenile information among schools, law enforcement, and the judicial and child welfare systems. Troubled children need to be identified early, and one of the best ways to accomplish this is to ensure that a child's inappropriate behavior anywhere – at school, on the streets – is shared through a seamless system. Current confidentiality rules hinder the sharing of this vital information, and thus we support a change in state statute to facilitate such sharing. Part of this effort of identifying troubled students may involve increased training for teachers, administrators and law-enforcement in early identification and referral skills for these children.

If they have not done so recently, schools may want to consider a comprehensive review of their physical facilities and the way such facilities could be enhanced to increase safety. Students made it clear at the Summit that they do not want to turn their public schools into armed camps. Nevertheless, there may be some common sense changes that can make schools safer. Public schools may also want to revisit policies regarding open campuses to ensure they do not hinder having safe and orderly schools.

**Every public school in the state should welcome parental involvement. Every high school should provide parents with a pamphlet that clearly spells out many opportunities for them to get involved.**

Public schools should ensure that their crisis plans are up to date. Working with law enforcement and medical emergency personnel, schools already focus on fire and other disasters. They may want to broaden their crisis plans to include other safety issues.

Finally, middle schools and high schools are now often very large. We need to examine options to ensure that students cannot 'anonymously' go through years of schooling without really connecting with other students and school staff and faculty. The anonymity found in some big schools makes the earlier identification of potential problems all that much harder. From physically smaller schools to "schools within schools" and more structured homeroom periods, Colorado's schools have many options to diminish the alienation that some students may feel in large schools.

Perhaps the best way to summarize this section is to quote Summit participant Ron Stephens, director of the National School Safety Center. He said, "A safe school is in place when students can learn and teachers can teach in a welcoming environment, free of intimidation and fear. It is a setting where the educational climate fosters a spirit of acceptance and care for every child; where behavior expectations are clearly communicated, consistently enforced and fairly applied. Unlimited options and potential exist for safe school planning. It requires only the ability to get started." ■

**This report was published by the Office of the Governor and the Office of the Attorney General, State of Colorado.**

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# Summit on School Safety and the Prevention of Youth Violence

Auraria Events Center, Denver — June 19, 1999

***Panelists***

**Ruben Archuleta**
Police Chief, retired
Pueblo

**Dean Askew**
Executive Director
Street Beat, Inc.

**Ron Booth**
Principal
Arapahoe High School

**Craig Bowman**
Teacher
Jefferson County Public Schools

**J. Langston Boyd, Jr.**
Senior Pastor
Shorter Community AME Church

**Mark Brewer**
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Colorado Community Church

**Frank DeAngelis**
Principal
Columbine High School

**Dave DeForest Stalls**
Director
The Spot

**Delbert S. Elliot**
Director
Center for the Study & Prevention of Violence

**Russell George**
Speaker
Colorado House of Representatives

**Kay Hymowitz**
Senior fellow
Manhattan Institute

**Mary Lou Jackson**
School Board Member
Pueblo Public Schools

**Leon Kelly**
Director
Open Door Youth Gang Alternative Program

**Doug Linkhart**
Member
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**Judy Margrath Huge**
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